

“A living and abiding voice”

**Week 7: Introduction to *The Fragments of Papias***

Papias (c. 60 – 130) was bishop of Hierapolis, a city in Phrygia in Asia Minor. The principal sources of information about Papias come from the works of Irenaeus and Eusebius. Papias was the author of a five volume work titled *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord*, which though now lost, is quoted as fragments in Irenaeus, Eusebius and other early church writers.

According to Irenaeus, Papias was a friend of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and a hearer of John, the apostle and disciple of Jesus. Irenaeus also says that Papias was a convinced millenarian who, influenced by the Book of Revelation, believed in a coming one thousand year reign of Christ. On the other hand, Eusebius in *Church History*, quoted portions of Papias’s writings, demonstrating that Papias distinguished between two persons named John: the apostle and disciple of Jesus, and another whom Papias identifies as an “elder” named John. The widely held view today is that Papias most likely had no direct personal acquaintance with any eyewitnesses to Christ, but seems to have known followers of the apostles, known as “elders.” This would make Papias a “third generation” Christian, after the first generation eyewitness of the apostles and the second generation of their followers known as “elders.” Papias is, therefore, a significant witness to the oral tradition and early written witness to Christ, and a witness of the transition from the apostolic age to the post-apostolic early church.

Papias is also a witness to the earliest sources of information about the narrative traditions of the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Regarding the origins of the Gospel of Matthew, Papias reported that Matthew wrote the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew “and each person interpreted them as best he could.” This is significant because it suggests that Matthew was initially writing to a Hebrew speaking Jewish community, and that his gospel was later translated into Greek.

Regarding Mark’s gospel, Papias reported that Mark had been a companion and interpreter of the apostle Peter who wrote down from memory Peter’s preaching about Jesus. This suggests that the gospel of Mark is the “living word” or kerygma of Peter’s preaching about Jesus. Though modern scholars use caution, there seems to be no reason to doubt that Mark was associated with Peter (Acts 12:12 and 1 Peter 5:13) and could have been the author of the gospel attributed to him. Paul also mentions Mark in Colossians (4:10) as being with him in prison in Rome. The tradition of Papias about Mark is significant for two reasons. First, it means that Mark is the earliest of the gospels, written about 65 AD, and second, it means Mark’s gospel gives voice to the content Peter’s preaching about Jesus. This means that Mark’s gospel is also probably the closest we have to an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus.

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**Excerpts from *The Fragments of Papias*:**

[1] Irenaeus and others record that John, the theologian and apostles, survived until the time of Trajan. After this Papias of Hierapolis and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, both of whom had heard him, became well known. (Eusebius, c. 260-340, *Chronicle*).

[2] At this time there flourished in Asia Polycarp, the disciple of the apostles, who had been appointed to the bishopric of the church in Smyrna by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the

Lord. At this time Papias, who was himself bishop of the diocese of Hierapolis, became well known. (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.36.1-2).

[3] Five books of Papias are in circulation, which are entitled “Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord.” Irenaeus also mentions these as the only works written by him, saying something like this: “Papias, a man of the early period, who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp, bears witness to these things in writing in the fourth of his books. For there are five books composed by him.” So says Irenaeus. Yet Papias himself, in the preface to his discourses indicates...that he received the matters of the faith from those who had known them [the apostles]:

I will not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, everything I carefully learned then from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For unlike most people I do not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else’s commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance someone who had been a follower of the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders – what Andrew or Peter said, of Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice.

Here it is worth noting that he lists the name of John twice. The first he mentions in connection with Peter and James and Matthew and the rest of the apostles clearly meaning the Evangelist, but he classes the other John with others outside the number of the apostles by changing the wording and putting Aristion before him, and distinctly calls him “elder”...

...For our present purpose we must also add to his statements already quoted above a tradition concerning Mark, who wrote the Gospel, which has been set forth in these words:

And the Elder used to say this: “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intent of giving an ordered account of the Lord’s sayings. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his concern not to omit anything which he heard or to make any false statements in them.”

Such, then, is the account given by Papias with respect to Mark. But with respect to Matthew the following was said:

So Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew language and each person interpreted them as best he could.

The same writer utilized testimonies from the first letter of John and, likewise, from that of Peter. And he has related another account about a woman accused of many sins before the Lord, which the Gospel According to the Hebrews contains. And these things we must take into account, in addition to what has already been stated. (Eusebius *Church History* 3.39).

[5] Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, who was a disciple of John the Theologian and a companion of Polycarp, wrote five books on the sayings of the Lord. In them he made a list of apostles, and after Peter and John, Philip and Thomas and Matthew, he included among the disciples of the Lord Aristion and another John, whom he also called “the Elder.” So, some think that this John

is the author of the two short catholic epistles which circulate under the name of John, because the men of the earliest period accept only the first epistle. And some have mistakenly thought that the Apocalypse was also his. And Papias is also in error regarding the millennium, and so is Irenaeus, who follows him.

Papias says in his second book that John the Theologian and James his brother were killed by the Jews. The aforesaid Papias recorded, on the authority of the daughters of Philip, that Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, drank the poison of a snake in the name of Christ when put to the test by the unbelievers and was protected from all harm. He also records other amazing things, in particular one about Manaim's mother, who was raised from the dead. As for those who were raised from the dead by Christ, he states that they survived until the time of Hadrian. (Philip of Side, fifth c., *Church History*).

[10] Regarding, however, the divine inspiration of the book [i.e. the Revelation of John] we think it superfluous to speak at length, since the blessed Gregory (I mean the Theologian) and Cyril, and men of an older generation as well, namely Papias, Irenaeus, Methodius, and Hippolytus, bear witness to its genuineness. (Andrew of Caesarea 563-637, *Preface to the Apocalypse*).

[20] For the last of these, John, surnamed "the Son of Thunder," when he was a very old man (as Irenaeus and Eusebius and a succession of other trustworthy historians have handed it down to us) and about the time when terrible heresies had cropped up, dictated the Gospel to his own disciple, the virtuous Papias of Hierapolis, to complete the message of those who had preached to the peoples of the whole world. (Anonymous. *Commentary on the Gospel of John from the writings of various Greek Fathers*).

[21] But so great a light of godliness shone upon the minds of Peter's listeners that they were not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine proclamation. So, with all kinds of exhortations they begged Mark (whose Gospel is extant), since he was Peter's follower, to leave behind a written record of the teaching given to them verbally, and did not quit until they had persuaded the man, and thus they became the immediate cause of the scripture called "The Gospel According to Mark." And they say that the apostle, aware of what had occurred because the Spirit had revealed it to him, was pleased with their zeal and sanctioned the writing for study in the churches. Clement quotes the story in the sixth book of the *Hypotyposes*, and the bishop of Hierapolis, name Papias, corroborates him. He also says that Peter mentions Mark in his first epistle which, they say, he composed in Rome itself, as he himself indicates, referring to the city metaphorically as Babylon in these words, "She who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, as does Mark, my son." (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.15). (Excerpts from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Trans. Lightfoot & Harmer, Ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition, 1989).

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### **Meditation**

If you did not have a copy of the New Testament how would you share your faith with others? Papias wrote of desiring to hear "a living and abiding voice" about Jesus Christ. This reminds me of Paul's words to the Corinthians, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:2-3). Early Christians like Papias understood the value and power of hearing the living word of God speaking in a human voice. Because the New Testament did not

yet exist, the earliest of Christians could not quote chapter and verse, but they could embody the love and grace of God through word and deed. This is what it means to be in mission: to witness to the abiding love of God with a living voice so that the next generation might believe.

When Protestant missionaries first arrived in Japan in 1859, Christianity had been prohibited since 1614, and the edict against Christianity would still not be lifted until 1872. For the first thirteen years of Protestant mission, the Bible was illegal and open public worship remained prohibited. Under this severe constraint, missionaries worked to prepare for the next generation, who would hopefully see the prohibition lifted. They produced tracts and histories about Christianity; they produced Japanese-English dictionaries for study; and they began to translate the New Testament into Japanese. The first Japanese translation of the New Testament was published in 1880, the result of cooperation between early Japanese Christians, missionaries, and the financial help of the Bible Societies of America, England and Scotland.

One of the first missionaries to arrive in Japan in 1859, Rev. John Liggins of the Episcopal Church (USA), was forced to return to home due to illness in 1860. Upon his return, in August 1861, Liggins wrote a report to his mission board outlining the difficulties they faced, while remembering that they were also preparing for future generations of Japanese Christians and missionary co-workers. Liggins argued that though Christianity was still prohibited and the scriptures illegal, Christians could still, quoting Paul's words, be "living epistles" of Christ.

This, of course, means that each of us may be the only Bible anyone ever reads. Papias understood that "a living and abiding voice" was a human voice that powerfully witnesses to the living presence of Christ. The faith of the Christian church is passed to the next generation through "living epistles," through people who embody, in word and deed, the good news of Jesus Christ. The written word, scripture, theology, creeds, and the means of conveying them through writing – and even the technological transmission of today – are only as effective as the "living and abiding voice" that speaks through them about Jesus Christ. The voice of Christ is alive in the human heart through faith, animating our voices and lives.

"*The Fragments of Papias*" have significance for St. Mark's and its mission. St. Mark's Lutheran Church is named for the writer of the earliest gospel, who Papias recorded, was someone who had heard the living voice of Peter preach the good news about Jesus. If we are to believe Papias, Mark sought to preserve this living voice of Peter and his preaching about Jesus.

Like a relay race, the Christian faith is passed, from one generation to the next. What is handed to the next generation is the living word about Jesus who forgives, encourages and sustains human beings in times of challenge and trial, always giving hope and joy. Like runners in a race, we hand on the faith through a living and abiding word about Jesus to others.

Each day this world reminds us, through hatred, division and strife, that people still need the living and abiding voice of Jesus. You might be the only Bible anyone ever reads. May your voice be a living and abiding voice of Christ's love, reconciliation and peace for all people. Amen.

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**For further reading:**

*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. Edited by Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishers, second edition, 1999.

*The Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.